Chinese Fashion Designers in Shanghai: Identifying a Fresh Perspective about their Role in the World Order of Fashion

Tim Lindgren

Abstract

Shanghai possesses an apt legacy, once referred to as “Paris of the East”. Municipal aspirations for Shanghai to assume a position among the great fashion cities of the world have been integrated in the recent re-shaping of this modern city into a role model for Chinese creative enterprise yet China is still known primarily as centre of clothing production.

Increasingly however, “Made in China” is being replaced by “Created in China” drawing attention to two distinct consumer markets for Chinese designers. Fashion designers who have entered the global fashion system for education or by showing their collections have generally adopted a design aesthetic that aligns with Western markets, allowing little competitive advantage.

In contrast, Chinese designers who rest their attention on the domestic Chinese market find a disparate, highly competitive marketplace. The pillars of authenticity that for foreign fashion brands extend far into their cultural and creative histories, often for many decades in the case of Louis Vuitton, Hermes and Christian Dior do not yet exist in China in this era of rapid globalisation. Here, the cultural bedrock allows these same pillars to extend only thirty years or so into the past reaching the moments when Deng Xiaoping granted China’s creative entrepreneurs passage.

To this end, interviews with fashion designers in Shanghai have been undertaken during the last twelve months for a PhD dissertation. Production of culture theory has been used to identify working methods, practices of production and the social and cultural milieu necessary for designers to achieve viability.

Preliminary findings indicate that some fashion designers have adopted an as-yet unexplored strategy of business and brand development with a distinct Chinese aesthetic at its core, in contrast to the clichéd cultural iconography often viewed by Western viewers as representative of Chinese creativity.

Key Words: China, Shanghai, fashion, aesthetics, shanzhai, consumption, designer

****

Shanghai possesses an exotic legacy for a fashion study, once considered the 'Paris of the East'.[i] With a recent history that resonates with political turmoil and the opaque machinations of the ruling Communist party, in the last few decades this city has been recast as a gleaming metropolis representing China's new global imperative. Municipal aspirations for Shanghai to assume a position among the great fashion cities of the world have been integrated in the recent re-shaping of this city into a role model for Chinese creative enterprise, [ii] yet China is still known primarily as centre of clothing production. However this is changing.

This paper explores the roles of fashion designers in post-modern Shanghai, by briefly examining the production of fashion over the last thirty years, and then by introducing three new case studies that have been distilled from research undertaken over the last five years in Shanghai. My research shows that some fashion designers in Shanghai reject the homogenised Parisian system of fashion weeks, trade shows and media legitimisation and may represent a new global aesthetic.

Fashion is an important medium for the construction of identity.[iii] In Shanghai, fashion has been a prominent aspect of the mythology of the urban cityscape since the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The qipao, for example, an iconic garment became popular at this time and remains a central image in our perception of Chinese dress. '*Haipai'* or the 'Shanghai style' expressed the commercial and cosmopolitan culture of modern China, and it was in this city that the term '*modeng'*, a transliteration of the word 'modern' first appeared, alluding to all that was new and fashionable.[iv]

Shanghai has been a centre of production for clothing since China opened for trade in 1978, after Deng Xiaoping granted Chinese entrepreneurs new permissions. Over the last thirty years, foreign fashion companies have been attracted to valuable economies of scale and competitive costs of garment production, resulting in China becoming the manufacturer to the world [v]. Increasingly though, 'Made in China' is being replaced by 'Created in China'.[vi] Chinese creativity is rapidly taking shape and the country's consumer market with an emphasis on domestic brands is now as important as its export markets. The Chinese government, traditionally supportive of the textile industry, has urged companies to maintain international market share while developing the huge domestic market as China has longstanding concerns that its textiles sector is too dependent on exports. Also, at a macroscopic level Chinese government policy is focused on strengthening the economic benefits of value adding for domestic brands.[vii] Thus, the homogenisation of the Western fashion system has created new opportunities for Chinese designers, and domestic customers are increasingly interested in local offerings, as they become sophisticated consumers of global products.

For designers, a focus on the international market, and the Parisian fashion system means conquering their domestic market first and from this perspective two groups of Chinese fashion designers can be identified. Families who immigrated during the Chinese Cultural Revolution to countries outside of China represent the first group. Mostly they have little in common with China's reputation as a manufacturing hub, belonging to families with few textile industry connections. Many point to a communal cultural shift freeing them from traditional career expectations. Prior mainstream success of Asian classical musicians, artists and filmmakers means the arts have become an increasing attractive career choice for traditionally inclined Chinese families. Importantly, the legitimacy of fashion stems from its allegiance to entrenched Chinese aesthetic traditions of calligraphy and written expression, an observation that has had far reaching implications for designers in Mainland China.

This group of designers is more interested in aligning their creative vision with a globally mainstream audience than playing on the Chinese heritage.[viii] In this way the Chinese component of their design signature is relevant if China is being referenced

in the wider fashion community. Unlike the momentum built in the 1970s and 1980s by Japanese designers who influenced the fashion world with an Asian minimalist chic based upon a new avant-garde aesthetic,[ix] the success of these Chinese designers is reliant on their integration with globally relevant fashion ideals that appeal to specific consumers.

The second group is found in China. Mainland Chinese designers have previously been defined as belonging to three generations. Referred to as 'the pioneers', 'the practitioners' and 'the prospects', they are the product of a Chinese fashion education process that has moved quickly from a state-sponsored system to one that echoes international models. This change, 'beyond the measure of ordinary times'[x], has also paralleled the rise of the market economy in China, now a post-modern melting pot of diverse consumptive practice. Operating within this generally urban environment the aspirations of the latest generation of fashion designers are now converging with new opportunities to contribute to the Chinese creative economy.

The first designers, 'the pioneers' were part of the factory system and were active at the beginning of the market economy in 1978. The Cultural Revolution left a distinct impression on the populace, and roles in clothing production were still controlled by state-run factories. The products they generated were mainly exported but exposure to European aesthetics and the technical specifications of Western apparel fanned new aspirations.[xi] Key to their experiences is the lack of domestic industry infrastructure prohibiting them from developing their own brands alongside a non-existent consumer market for the type of fashion inspired by their experience.

Opportunities for legitimisation were few. Domestic fashion magazines with titles like '*Shanghai Fushi'* in 1985 and '*Zhongwai Fuzhang'* in 1987 stimulated consumer interest in fashion. Prior to this, publications had been for the industry and devoid of fashion trends. [xii] '*Elle*' magazine entered the Chinese market in 1988 under license with little initial success. The later arrival, via partnership, of '*Vogue China'* in 2005 was promoted as the arrival of the ultimate fashion critic, no longer subtly promoting the socialist ethos but espousing the trappings of a new luxury lifestyle. [xiii]

The second group, 'the practitioners' began during this time of increasing social relaxation and have been described as a transitional generation who grew up in a modern era of reform.[xiv] Clothing choices were no longer reliant on interpreting an intricate political culture and luxury brands began to enter the country with the first fashion show from Pierre Cardin in 1978.[xv] Opportunities for creative experimentation were fertile ground for now-iconic Chinese designers, Liang Zi who started her label in 1994 and Ma Ke who began in 1996. Both designers graduated with fashion-specific training from a variety of institutions previously unavailable to the last generation. In 1994 the first international design school was established as a partnership with Shanghai's Donghua University which eventually formed the Raffles International Design Institute.[xvi]

During this period the process of internationalisation was rapidly gaining momentum while entrepreneurs were encouraged. The clothing industry was among the first to privatise with small family enterprises known as '*getihu*'. The orientation of fashion production towards the West was also changing as a domestic market for newly relevant clothing expanded and small business focused on satisfying local demand. However, designers still did not have a firm grasp on a particular consumer market and a fragmented industry structure meant that individual creative efforts met with little official support.

The last group of Mainland Chinese designers is described as 'the prospects', emerging from the generation embodied by the one child policy and having grown up in an era of relative social stability where education is viewed as key to social standing.[xvii] Positioned at the forefront of a society weary of moral doctrine and oriented to materialism, they have grown up walking under the billboards of luxury brands like Armani and Gucci wondering whether this type of global appeal is possible for Chinese fashion designers.[xviii] Opportunities for validation have become plentiful in the multitudes of traditional and online fashion media.

Yet designers of this new Chinese era face the same fundamental problems of self-promotion, funding and ongoing viability that have plagued emergent creative industries practitioners which includes those examined in the United Kingdom.[xix] Often designers have limited personal financial capital, and a multi-faceted globally

oriented media situated amid an increasingly important social hierarchy means a careful focus must be applied to constructing a brand strategy, especially as global consumers demand more environmental information about the garments they purchase.[xx] Those designers attempting to build individual brands based upon personal aesthetics must do so in a market generally characterised internationally as the home of fast fashion, rife with copying and large volume manufacturing. [xxi] While international attention on China might mean that opportunity abounds, the fast pace of urban renewal in China means little for commercial stability. Designers speak of the rapid re-construction of city precincts as city councils vie with each for development prestige, aligning themselves with government policies that are open to interpretation for commercial benefit.

Helen Lee from Shanghai typifies a common story emerging from my research interviews. Helen has successfully mined the historical legacy of Shanghai as a place of innovation and cultural fusion by defining her label as 'Insh' for 'In Shanghai'. Her original retail store, once situated at 200 Taikang Road outside Tianzifang, the official government creative cluster of this prominent area of the old French Concession, was appropriated by the city council ostensibly to build a tourist center for Expo 2010. This failed to eventuate, quickly becoming a coffee shop, illustrating the opaque and opportunistic attitude where prime real estate is concerned.[xxii] Wang Wei, another highly lauded designer from the same generation worked in Shanghai for the popular 'Layefe' label receiving a great deal of press. Wang Wei eventually travelled to London, after setting up his label 'Wang Wei Gallery' to show his collection. I interviewed Mr. Wang in Shanghai in 2006 and was impressed with his craftsmanship and professionalism.[xxiii] Yet, despite a string of awards and critical acclaim, success has been elusive and Mr. Wang is no longer in Europe. During my field trips to Shanghai in 2011 and 2012, Mr. Wang was unable to be found. It was suggested by other interviewees that the market had moved on, further highlighting the difficulties of establishing a commercially viable business.

Questions of legitimisation, of the quality of the Chinese fashion system, the transparency of the business environment and importantly, of the aesthetic qualities necessary for success arise from these kinds of stories, drawing inevitable comparisons with Western fashion systems. The pillars of authenticity that for foreign

brands extend far into their cultural and creative histories, often for tens of decades in the case of the luxury brands of Louis Vuitton, Burberry or Christian Dior, do not exist in China in this era of globalisation. Here the cultural bedrock allows these same pillars to extend only thirty years into the past to the moments when Deng Xiaoping granted China's creative entrepreneurs passage. However globalisation creates opportunity, and authenticity can be manufactured.[xxiv] Fashion designers in their capacity as creative individuals will reflect upon new cultural expectations as globalisation encourages diversity and stimulates renewed localism.

Research in 2012 indicates a chaotic environment for fashion designers in Shanghai. While the city has become a gleaming metropolis trading on its exotic legacy, a one-party government rules China, espousing a unique kind of socialism with Confucian characteristics. [xxv] Chinese consumption patterns are under-pinned by an increasing confidence. Personal attention is given to fashion because of a renewed sense of pride in China's heritage and an increasingly solid socio-economic base. New values such as youth, and individualism combine with traditional cultural and ethical values forming an amalgam of post-modern Chinese aspirations unlike any elsewhere. Consumers rapidly switch between labels as they test new identities. International travel is increasing, particularly to Europe as people seek authentic experiences that in turn reshape their practice of consumption when they return to China. A new sense of personal freedom encourages people to express their own tastes and attitude to life, something not yet formally acknowledged by the authorities because of its potential threat to the collective good.

Analysing this fragmented culture is important to determine how designers are developing their brand aesthetic. Successful fashion brands are able to create a story of heritage that conveys their brand 'DNA'. Their message is reinforced through constant promotion. Consumers identify with particular brands, creating a personal sense of self because of the values they attribute to the clothes they wear. The English label 'Burberry', for example, traces its lineage to World War One and the iconic trench coat, which is re-cast in a new iteration each season. In this way designers or brands are authenticated as the fashion system reinforces their message. Becoming legitimate means eventually attaining cultural acceptance, which in turn means that

consumers are less likely to question their purchase, returning each season as they increasingly identify with the brand. How will Chinese fashion designers do this?

My interviews with fashion designers in Shanghai allowed me to define three case studies. I have borrowed a Chinese word for the first case study, calling it '*Shanzhai*', representing simple practices of production and consumption. These designers have aligned with the fluidity of incremental cultural change and work in the domestic market, assimilating, re-organising and reassembling diverse international fashion symbols for local consumption. Clothes are quickly made and consumed for intrinsic symbolic values. '*Shanzhai'* usually means that an idea is derivative of others and that it is perhaps a localised knock-off. China's capacity for imitation is aptly illustrated by the illegal reproduction of luxury handbags, however much of the meaning of this word also relates to the ability of designers to adapt to the local market, perhaps by adding details that are not representative of the 'DNA' of the original symbol, offering new variations for the consumer that sometimes distorts the symbolic content. A synthetic polo shirt with plastic crystal appliqué, branded 'Ralph Lauren' is an example of a product that was never meant to exist. These designers tend to rely on their closeness to the capacity of local garment factories and their ability to quickly translate new ideas for local consumption. Dependent on small production capacities and reliant upon a never-ending supply of new products for re-constitution, their work is located in the daily context and is opportunistic. However they are aspirational, nurturing useful relationships and constantly looking forward to increased retail presence and greater profits and in this capacity they are emergent fashion designers, contemplating processes of legitimacy in their quest to move through the fashion system.

Designers who have become attached to a particular point along the global fashion timeline are my second case study. The '*Classicists*' are more advanced than the previous group, creating regular clothing collections for sale to local boutiques and attempt to utilise local media to promote their business. They propagate their fashion practice by brand building while searching for validation in an emergent Chinese fashion system. However their attitude toward trade shows such as 'Fashion Week' in Shanghai and Beijing is negative. Designers spoke of the need to qualify, to raise money and of needing to know the right people to receive a place on the government

list for consideration. Many spoke of travelling to Europe for inspiration. The French fashion system is still a focal point. Often they are sole traders or have a business partner, but must multi-task. From a cultural point of view, their aesthetic resonates with global aspirations. One designer referenced 'Romantic Paris'. Another spoke of her Italian experience. It appears there is a conflict between their Chinese identity and the ever-present symbolism of fashion advertising that pervades Shanghai, as they utilise their energies to re-imagine Western styles.

The third case study is the '*New Internationalists'*. These designers seem to reject signs of capitalism apparent in their society, having adopted a path of ethical and creative development that aligns loosely with embedded social morals of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Mainly these designers were not interested in normal media channels, preferring to develop their businesses by word of mouth. An Asian aesthetic resonated deeply and there was a sense of closeness to the natural cycle of the world. Simple construction and natural fibres are often present in their collections. The divorce of man from his environment and an awareness of its ongoing degradation were implicit in these conversations. Of the case studies, these designers were able to articulate a path forward that aligned with a greater time line, pre-dating post-modern Shanghai. They questioned materialism, showing their individual creative development was directly related to a critical reflection of cultural norms and a stance away from the contemporary Chinese culture of increasing consumption. Importantly these ideals parallel advanced Western thinking about more efficient resource use. Consistent with Yuanyuan Wu's view, the tension between becoming citizens of the world yet remaining Chinese means their inward focus will shape their aesthetic values.[xxvi]

Much has been written about opportunities to develop fashion brands in China, especially foreign luxury fashion and it appears that the appetite for imported fashion products is yet to be satiated.[xxvii] However as Chinese designers take firmer grasp of their domestic market, some may be able to impart a new global aesthetic, one comprising elements of the ethical structure of Confucianism and the inner creativity of Taoism, thus enabling them to move beyond irrational consumption into a new economy of style.

Notes

[i] Juanjuan Wu, *Chinese Fashion: From Mao to Now*. London: Oxford International Publishing. (2009): 136.

[ii] Christopher Breward and David Gilbert, *Fashion's World Cities*. New York: Berg.(2006): 3-4.

[iii] Diana Crane; *Fashion and its Social Agendas*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. (2000).

[iv] Marie-Claire Bergere; *Shanghai, China's Gateway to Modernity* California: Stanford University Press. (2002).

[v] Kevin Zhang, China as the World Factory. Edited by Kevin Zhang in *China as the World Factory*. London: Routledge. (2006).

[vi] Michael Keane, *Created in China: the Great New Leap Forward*. London and New York: Routledge. (2007).

[vii] Wuwei Li, *How Creativity is Changing China*: Bloomsbury. (2011).

[viii] Christine Tsui, *China Fashion: Conversations with designers*. London: Oxford International Publishers. (2009).

[ix] Lise Skov, *Fashion Nation: A Japanese Globalisation Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma*. New York: Berg. (2003).

[x] Wu, *Chinese Fashion: From Mao to Now*. xii

[xi] Tsui, *China Fashion: Conversations with designers*.

[xii] Wu, *Chinese Fashion: From Mao to Now*.

[xiii] John Hartley and Lucy Montgomery, 'Fashion as consumer entrepreneurship: Emergent Risk culture, social network markets and the launch of *Vogue* in China' in *Chinese Journal of Communication, 2* (1), (2009) 61-76.

[xiv] Pierre Xiao Lu, *Elite China: Luxury Consumer Behaviour in China*. Singapore: John Wiley & Sons. (2008).

[xv] Pierre Cardin, Viewed 05/03/2011, from Pierre Cardin. www.pierrecardin.com

[xvi] Tsui, *China Fashion: Conversations with designers*.

[xvii] Xiao Lu, *Elite China: Luxury Consumer Behaviour in China*.

[xviii] Ibid.

[xix] Angela McRobbie, *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* London: Routledge. (1998).

[xx] Tim Lindgren, Marta Sinclair and Dale Miller; 'Australian fashion designers: the potential nexus with China' in *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 14*(4), (2010) 598-614.

[xxi] Simona Segre Reinach, 'China and Italy: Fast Fashion versus Pret-a-Porter: Towards a New Culture of Fashion' in *Journal of Dress, Body and Culture 9*(1), (2005) 43-56.

[xxii] Helen Lee: A private interview in Tianzifang, authors interview (2012).

[xxiii] Wang Wei: A private interview in his showroom, authors interview (2006).

[xxiv] Richard Peterson, 'In Search of Authenticity' in *Management Studies, 42*(5), (2005) 1083-1098.

[xxv] Daniel Bell, *China's New Confucianism*: Princeton University Press. (2008).

[xxvi] Wu, *Chinese Fashion: From Mao to Now*. 181.

[xxvii] Andrew Moody and Haiyan Hu. 'Second-tier city now 'unrecognisable''. Viewed 09/03/2011, from China Daily, www.europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2011-03/04/content_12115564.htm

Bibliography

Bell, Daniel.*China's New Confucianism*: Princeton University Press. 2008.

Bergere, Marie.-Claire. *Shanghai, China's Gateway to Modernity*. Translated by J. Lloyd. California: Stanford University Press. 2002.

Breward, Christopher. and David Gilbert. *Fashion's World Cities*. Edited by C. Breward. New York: Berg. 2006.

Cardin, Pierre. Pierre Cardin www.pierrecardin.com (accessed 05/03/2011). 2011.

Crane, Diana. *Fashion and its social agendas*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2000.

Hartley, John. and Lucy Montgomery. Fashion as consumer entrepreneurship: Emergent Risk culture, social network markets and the launch of *Vogue* in China in *Chinese Journal of Communication* 2 (1):61-76. (accessed 18/08/10). 2009.

Keane, Michael. *Created in China: the great new leap forward, Media, culture and social change in Asia*. London and New York: Routledge. 2007.

Lindgren, Tim. Wang Wei: A private interview in his showroom. Shanghai. 2006.

Lindgren, Tim. Helen Lee: An interview in her showroom in Tianzifang. Shanghai. 2012.

Lindgren, Tim, Marta Sinclair and Dale Miller. Australian fashion designers: the potential nexus with China in *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 14 (4):598-614. 2010.

McRobbie, Angela. *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* London: Routledge. 1998.

Moody, Andrew and Hu Haiyan. 'Second-tier city now 'unrecognisable'. www.europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2011-03/04/content_12115564.htm (accessed 09/03/2011). 2011.

Peterson, Richard. In Search of Authenticity. *Management Studies* 42 (5):1083-1098. 2005.

Segre Reinach, Simona. China and Italy: Fast Fashion versus Pret a Porter. Towards a New Culture of Fashion. *The Journal of Dress,Body and Culture* 9 (1):43-56. 2005.

Skov, Lise. *Fashion Nation: A Japanese Globalisation Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma*. Edited by S. Niessen, A.-M. Leshkowich and C. Jones, *Re-Orienting Fashion*. New York: Berg. 2003.

Smith, Ray. A Design Generation Rising. *The Wall Street Journal*. (accessed 07/09/10). 2009.

Sui, Anna . 'Anna Sui'. www.annasui.com, (accessed 25/02/2011). 2011.

Tsui, Christine . *China Fashion: Conversations with designers*. London: Oxford International Publishers. 2009.

Wu, Juanjuan . *Chinese Fashion: From Mao to Now*. London: Oxford International Publishing. 2009.

Wuwei, Li . *How Creativity is Changing China*. Ed. M. Keane: Bloomsbury. 2011.

Xiao Lu, Pierre. *Elite China: Luxury consumer behaviour in China*. Singapore: John Wiley & Sons. 2008.

Zhang, Kevin H.. China as the World Factory. In *China as the World Factory*, 2006.